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Fire and Fury in the Gulf

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Amid the fire and fury of Michael Wolff's explosive account of the Trump presidency so far, readers hoping for greater insight into some of the international controversies of his first year in office were left wanting more than the few pages on the president's May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia and Israel. Wolff suggests that the 'Trump Doctrine' boiled down to a transactional 'If you give us what we want, we'll give you what you want', and that Saudi Arabia had become a test case to put it into action. Yet beyond a few platitudes about the ties between Jared Kushner and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Wolff did not dwell on the runup to and the aftermath of the Riyadh Summit that Trump attended in May 2017. This is an omission because the outreach by officials from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the then-incoming administration provides a cautionary tale about the conduct of foreign policy in the Age of Trump.

Coiling the Spring

Relations between the Obama administration and its counterparts in the Gulf soured considerably after the Arab Spring upheaval. Officials in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) capitals—particularly Riyadh and Abu Dhabi—reacted negatively to the withdrawal of U.S. support in February 2011 for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak—like them, a longstanding American political and security partner - and to the U.S. recognition of the Islamist governments that subsequently came to power in Tunisia and Egypt. President Obama's decision in September 2013 to override his own 'red line' and not intervene after the Assad regime used chemical weapons dismayed policymakers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who had been backing different rebel groups in the Syrian civil war. Prominent Saudi officials barely disguised their anger at being sidelined from the U.S.-led nuclear negotiations with Iran that culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. In March 2016, a remark about 'free riders' in an extensive profile of the 'Obama Doctrine' in *The Atlantic* **provoked** additional fury among ruling elites in GCC who felt it was aimed partly at them.

As ties with the Obama White House deteriorated, ruling circles in Gulf capitals became increasingly muscular in pursuing their own regional interests. This was, in part, a reaction by Saudi and Emirati officials to Qatar's assertive approach to the uprisings in North Africa and Syria between 2011 and 2013. Led by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatar supported the political transitions in Tunisia and Egypt and the anti-regime uprisings in Libya and Syria and felt comfortable with the regional empowerment of political Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood. In contrast, the UAE followed a diametrically opposed approach that sought to eliminate the potential for any Islamist-led opposition at first domestically and later regionally. Although both the UAE and Qatar participated in the NATO-led intervention in Libya that ousted Colonel Gaddafi in 2011, their supply of material to different militia groups helped sow the seeds for the conflict that later tore the country apart.

Emir Hamad stepped down on June 25, 2013, and handed power to his son, 33-year old Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Eight days later, on July 3, 2013, Mohammed Morsi was toppled by a military-led coup in Egypt and replaced by General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who succeeded him as President in 2014. Saudi Arabia and the UAE (and Kuwait) immediately pledged more than USD 12 billion to the new Egyptian regime, an amount that far **outstripped** the USD 7.5 billion in financial aid and development assistance that Qatar had provided to Morsi's government in 2012-2013. Saudi and Emirati pressure on the new Qatari emir also **began** within weeks of Sheikh Tamim taking power, according to Qatar's then-Foreign Minister (and current Minister of State for Defense) Khalid bin Mohammed al-Attiyah. Having been presented with an unexpected opportunity to reverse the openings of the Arab Spring, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh acted rapidly to ensure that neither the protest movements nor Qatar could ever again threaten the political status quo.

The second phase of the Gulf States' regional assertiveness (after Qatar's activist approach in 2011 and 2012) played out in Libya, Yemen, the Gulf, and Egypt. Saudi Arabia and the UAE funneled tens of billions of dollars in financial aid and investment in infrastructure designed to kickstart the ailing Egyptian economy. The UAE coordinated closely with Egypt and Russia to triangulate support for the Libyan strongman, Khalifa

Haftar, as he battled Islamist militias in Eastern Libya, and carved out a largely autonomous sphere of influence separate from the internationally backed political process in Tripoli. The Saudis and Emiratis, together with the Bahrainis, **withdrew** their ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014 and accused Doha of interfering in the domestic affairs of its regional neighbors.

The first iteration of the Gulf diplomatic crisis lasted for nine months until Qatar agreed to make several security-related concessions, whereby the three ambassadors returned to Doha in December 2014. The Riyadh Agreement, signed by the six GCC foreign ministers on November 16, 2014, ostensibly settled the Qatar dispute. Seven senior members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, including its acting leader Mahmoud Hussein, were relocated to Turkey, and several Emirati Islamists who had taken up residence in Qatar after fleeing the security crackdown in the UAE were also **expelled**. Ten months later, the deployment of Qatari troops to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen appeared to seal Qatar's return to the GCC fold, and to signify an end to the pre-2014 rupture.

On the international stage, King Salman of Saudi Arabia made clear his displeasure with the Obama administration by canceling his planned attendance of the U.S.-GCC Summit at Camp David in May 2015. Six weeks earlier, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had launched Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. The Yemen war was designed to restore the government of President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, ousted in 2014 by the tactical alliance of Iran-allied Houthi rebels and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's armed loyalists. Launched just five days before the initial deadline (later extended to July 2015) in the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, the decision to take military action to counter and roll back perceived Iranian influence in Yemen **represented** a Saudi-led rebuke to the Obama administration's belief that it was possible to separate the nuclear issue from Iran's meddling in regional affairs.

Outreach to Trump

It was into this maelstrom of regional affairs and rivalries that the Trump administration launched itself after its unexpected triumph in the November 2016 presidential election. Officials from the UAE reached out almost immediately after the transition process had begun to share and project their points of view. The hawkish Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, held a three-hour meeting with Kushner, Steve Bannon, and Michael Flynn at Trump Tower in December 2016 – a visit that caused controversy because the UAE did **not notify** the Obama administration of the Crown Prince's presence in New York, as is customary when a de facto head of state travels to the United States. Another UAE-based visitor during the transition was Erik Prince, brother of Betsy DeVos, President-elect Trump's nominee as Secretary of Education. Prince had been **hired** by Abu Dhabi to develop a private security force after the demise of Blackwater in 2009. He 'presented himself as an unofficial envoy for Trump to high-ranking Emiratis' and met with a Russian official in a UAE-brokered meeting in Seychelles shortly before the inauguration, **reportedly** as part of an effort to establish a back-channel of communication over Syria and Iran.

Once in office, Abu Dhabi's influential ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, began to meet and talk regularly—up to once a week—with Kushner, the president's son-in-law, tasked with much of the Trump administration's Middle East policymaking. Kushner and Otaiba had been introduced in June 2016 by the real estate developer and longtime Trump confidante Thomas Barrack, Jr. Shortly after Trump took office, *Politico* **reported** that Kushner and Otaiba were 'in almost constant phone and email contact' and quoted Otaiba as stating that "he did all the asking, and I did all the talking." In the early weeks of the administration, Kushner also reached out to Saudi policymakers, including Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MbS)—like Kushner an ambitious millennial who had entered policymaking from a business background. They shared uncannily similar nicknames: 'Mr. Everything' (MbS) and the 'Secretary of Everything' (Kushner). The two men **grew close** and reportedly stayed up until nearly 4 am 'swapping stories and planning strategy' during an unannounced visit Kushner made to Saudi Arabia in October 2017.

A president and his senior staff determined to do things their way and bypass the traditional playbook of U.S. foreign policy and international diplomacy offered a potentially rich opening for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as did the political inexperience of many of the new appointees in the White House. There are indications that UAE officials did in fact, try to put pressure on Qatar during the final year of the Obama administration, only to be rebuffed by the lack of White House support. Ben Rhodes, President Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting, told a Global Politico podcast in January 2018 that 'the break with Qatar, we basically had to spend a lot of time trying to prevent that from happening.' He **noted** that under the Trump administration 'some of the things that have happened this year, interestingly, were things that we were trying to forestall' while in office.

Rarely in recent U.S. history has an administration entered office with such an avowed disdain for the policies of its predecessor. The expectation in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that the Trump presidency would adopt hawkish positions on regional issues such as Iran and Islamism, that aligned closely with their own, was **reaffirmed** by the appointments of James Mattis as Secretary of Defense and Mike Pompeo as Director of the CIA. Secretary Mattis had, in fact, worked as an informal and unpaid military advisor to the UAE in 2015, after retiring from active duty in the Marine Corps, and had **dubbed** the UAE 'Little Sparta' for its military expertise and professionalism. Just a week into the Trump presidency, the carrying out of a joint raid on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) targets in Yemen by U.S. and UAE special forces, which left one U.S. Navy Seal dead, provided an early example of such security and defense cooperation in action.

During the spring of 2017, both MbS and Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) of Abu Dhabi visited the White House, and President Trump announced that his first overseas visit would be to Saudi Arabia in May. This was **another break** from recent presidential tradition, as four of his five immediate predecessors, going back to Ronald Reagan, had made Canada their first point of call, with only George W. Bush in February 2001 opting for Mexico instead. Many of the preparations for the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh that the president attended in Riyadh on May 21-22 were made by the White House directly with

the Royal Court in Saudi Arabia, and not by the State Department. MbZ **visited** Trump at the White House just six days before the Riyadh Summit to talk through preparations for the meeting. In Riyadh, President Trump **met** bilaterally with leaders from five of the six GCC states, canceling on short notice a meeting with Oman's deputy prime minister Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud Al Said. During the summit, Trump was pictured grasping a glowing orb with Saudi King Salman and Egyptian President Sisi.

During his meeting with Emir Tamim of Qatar, President Trump **discussed** Qatar's "purchase of lots of beautiful military equipment because nobody makes it like the United States. And for us that means jobs, and it also means frankly great security back here, which we want." The president's comments made his subsequent swing against Qatar, after the Saudi and Emirati-led diplomatic and economic blockade began on June 5, 2017, the more surprising to observers of the presidency's transactional approach to diplomacy. In several tweets posted on June 6, President Trump claimed, "During my recent trip to the Middle East, I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar – look!" He **added**, "So good to see Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism, and all reference was pointing to Qatar." President Trump's tweets **suggested** that he drew a direct line between discussions—yet to be made public—in Riyadh on May 21-22 and the Qatar embargo, which began with a hack of the Qatar News Agency, believed by U.S. intelligence officials to have been orchestrated by the UAE on May 23, just a day after the end of the Summit.

So, too, did comments made in October 2017 by Bannon, two months after he left his position as White House Chief Strategist. Speaking at an event critical of Qatar at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC, Bannon **stated**, "I don't think it was just by happenstance that two weeks after the summit we saw the blockade by the UAE and Bahrain and Egypt and the King of Saudi Arabia on Qatar." He continued, "I think the single most important thing that's happening in the world is the situation in Qatar. What's happening in Qatar is every bit as important as what's happening in North Korea." Bannon spoke at the Hudson Institute on the same day that the McClatchy news agency reported that SCL Social Limited, a part of the same SCL Group as Cambridge Analytica (the data mining firm where Bannon served as Vice President before joining the White House) had disclosed a USD 330,000 contract with the UAE National Media Council. The contract included "a wide range of services specific to a global media campaign", including USD 75,000 for a social media campaign targeting Qatar during the UN General Assembly. McClatchy observed, too, that Bannon had visited Abu Dhabi to meet with MbZ in September 2017, and that Breitbart (the media platform associated with Bannon both before and after his brief White House stint) had published more than 80 mostly negative stories about Qatar since the GCC crisis erupted.

Fair-weather Friendship

The outreach and lobbying efforts made by Saudi and Emirati officials were not outliers, as policymakers across the political and business spectrum grappled to make sense of the

chaotic first year of the Trump administration. Saudi Arabia added at least six new lobbying firms to its Washington, DC, roster between November 2016 and May 2017, but its 28 **registered** lobbying contracts fell far short of the 47 maintained by Japan. Within the U.S., tech giants Apple, Facebook, and Google **spent** record sums on federal lobbying during 2017 as executives sought to counter political demands for greater regulation of their activity and shape the administration's thinking on immigration and other contentious issues. The lack of predictability in decision-making and the unorthodox background of some of the key principals in the White House contributed to a seemingly free-for-all scramble to gain the ear of the President and his inner circle, at least in the early months until the appointment of John Kelly as Chief of Staff in August 2017.

And yet, a striking element about the Saudi-Emirati outreach is the limited success it achieved. Officials may have seized the opportunity to shape the administration's thinking and succeeded temporarily, during June 2017, in getting the president to support the initial action against Qatar, but that proved a high watermark in cooperation that did not lead to any substantive follow-through. Herein lies the cautionary tale that other world leaders—from Australia's Malcolm Turnbull to Britain's Theresa May and Germany's Angela Merkel—also have discovered. The transactional approach to policymaking taken by the Trump presidency is not necessarily underpinned by any deeper or underlying commitment to a relationship of values or even interests. An example of this came in July 2017 when President Trump told Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network that he had made his presence at the Riyadh Summit conditional on USD 110 billion in arms sales and other agreements signed with Saudi Arabia. "I said, you have to do that, otherwise I'm not going," **bragged** the president.

A White House readout of a telephone call between President Trump and Qatar's Emir Tamim on January 15, 2018, further illustrated the lack of fixity in the president's position on key issues. Whereas Trump had **endorsed** the Saudi-Emirati blockade of Qatar in June 2017, and even sought on Twitter to take credit for the move, seven months later he thanked the Emir for "Qatari action to counter terrorism and extremism in all its forms." The timing of the call between President Trump and Emir Tamim was as notable as its content, as it came after several days of Emirati and Qatar accusations of aerial interceptions that significantly raised the tension in the months-long standoff. The call signaled not only the 180-degree flip since June 2017 in the president's position on the Gulf crisis, but it also made clear that the president no longer shared the view of Qatar's detractors that Doha represented a threat to regional security and stability.

Trump's reversal may, in part, reflect an acknowledgment that Qatar's leadership had signed memoranda of understanding with Washington on combating terrorism and its financing (July 2017) and on strengthening cooperation between the Public Prosecution in Qatar and the U.S. Department of Justice (January 2018). Officials from both countries also **convened** a technical exchange workshop in Doha on October 4, 2017, to develop a Domestic Designation system in Qatar and organized an inaugural U.S.-Qatar Counterterrorism Dialogue in Washington, DC, on November 8, 2017. These measures constituted practical steps to **deepen** the bilateral strategic and security partnership in ways that likely were noted by U.S. delegations to Doha, led by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson

and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, in October 2017.

Although the crisis in the Gulf may have passed its most dangerous moment—when for a few days in June 2017 the possibility of Saudi and Emirati military action against Qatar was deemed so serious by U.S. officials that Secretary of State Tillerson reportedly had to warn MbS and MbZ against any precipitous action—but it has had significant negative **consequences** for both the region and Washington. Within the region, four decades of diplomatic and technocratic cooperation among the GCC six states has been put at risk, threatening the survival of one of the hitherto most durable regional organizations in the Arab world. While the GCC managed to convene its annual summit in December 2017—against the expectations of many and largely out of respect to Kuwait’s Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, a widely respected elder statesman and the host of the meeting—it was **marred** by the non-attendance of the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini leadership, blindsided by the simultaneous announcement of a Saudi-Emirati cooperative partnership that pointedly excluded other GCC states, and adjourned amid acrimony on the first morning of the planned two-day event. It is hard to see how the GCC can recover after the sub-regional institution has failed to prevent three of its members from turning on a fourth twice in three years, and when it has been absent at every stage of the crisis, from the initial list of grievances to the subsequent attempts at mediation.

For the U.S., the Gulf row—at least in its early stages—damaged the credibility and the unity of American policymaking in the region, not least because it created the perception of a rift between the White House, on the one side, and the Departments of State and Defense, on the other. The notion that the U.S. lacked a unified approach toward the unfolding crisis was magnified by the contrast between Secretary Tillerson’s measured comments as he counseled a mediated solution to the standoff and the bellicose language of President Trump. On June 9, 2017—the same day that Secretary Tillerson called on the so-called Anti-Terror Quartet to moderate their position on Qatar—he was undercut visibly and in public as President Trump **stated**, “The nation of Qatar, unfortunately, has historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level.” Associates of Tillerson let it be known that the Secretary of State was “blindsided by the Trump statement” and “absolutely enraged that the White House and State Department weren’t on the same page.” For his part, Secretary Mattis was reported to have reacted with shock and disbelief to the Saudi and Emirati embargo of Qatar. He **thought** that “the Saudis had picked an unnecessary fight, and just when the administration thought they’d gotten everyone in the Gulf on the same page in forming a common front against Iran.”

Washington’s policy approaches toward Qatar appear now to have settled on the view that the standoff is detrimental to American strategic interests both in the Gulf and across the broader Middle East, and should be resolved by Kuwaiti-led mediation. However, the confused signals that came out of the Trump administration during its first six months in office do constitute a cautionary tale as they illustrate the vulnerability of a new and inexperienced political class to influence that came close to jeopardizing a key U.S. partnership in the Middle East. Unlike, say, the U.S. and Iran, there are no clearly-defined ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides the U.S. should support or oppose in its dealings with the GCC members, all of whom have been pivotal, in different ways, to the projection of U.S. power

and influence in the region. Looking back at the Gulf crisis, officials may reflect on the attempt to push the U.S. government toward supporting a policy in favor of Saudi and Emirati (but not American) interests; for their part, policymakers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and also Doha, are doubtless all too aware that they can no longer take unconditional U.S. support for granted and that the transactional nature of the Trump presidency means it will evaluate policy on a case-by-case basis that could chop and change without warning.

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